

2020-11-29 - Mark 13.24-37

O come, o come Emmanuel – Watchful waiting

Advent is a season of *watchful waiting*. Our faces are turned towards the coming of Jesus Christ and the joy of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness.

Nationally – globally, even – we are also in a season of *watchful waiting* – for a breakthrough in this pandemic which has paralysed much of society, crippled economies, and caused sickness and death. We are waiting for a restoration of normal life.

Disease, natural disaster, war, and social strife are part of the world that we long to be free of. Having spoken of the coming destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, Jesus speaks of these things as preliminaries to his return.

Jesus is speaking to his followers, as they face the troubled time that's coming upon them, upon Israel, upon Jerusalem, and indeed in a measure on the whole world. Worldwide chaos is the prelude to the Return of Christ when he comes to establish his rule on the earth.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.

As we prepare for the coming of the Jesus in humility as a baby at Christmas, we also look forward to his return in glory as Judge of all the world “the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (v26b). The picture painted is, I think, in equal part awesome and reassuring.

The terrifying descriptions of the darkening of the sun and moon light and other dramatic cosmic signs, is balanced by a couple of reassuring pictures.

Firstly, we hear of God's elect being gathered in by God's angels, presumably to a place of safety, as a shepherd gathers his flock together during the night to protect from predators and shelter them from the elements.

There is also the comforting image of the spring turning to summer. The tender twigs and new leaves of the fig tree indicate that summer is near. The distressing signs of a suffering world, are – as Paul says in Romans – rather like the signs of the pain of labour before the joy of new birth. The suffering and injustice are the background to the healing and judgement. The season is changing.

In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Aslan, representing Jesus, comes to a Narnia trapped in a permanent winter, bringing spring wherever he goes.

“Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”

Jesus says that his return is imminent; that he is even waiting at the door. But he said these words nearly two millennia ago. How *can* his return be imminent? How much longer will the old world order last? How long will we be trapped in winter before we can enjoy the new life and joy of spring?

‘How long, O Lord?’ has been the cry of people suffering as long as there have been people. It is not just during a pandemic in which we groan as we wait for a successful vaccine and resumption of normal life. ‘How long, O Lord?’ is also the cry of those who are persecuted for their faith, those caught in abusive relationships, those suffering chronic or incurable conditions, those struggling in caring roles, and many others. Maybe that cry is familiar to you.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

Jesus says that this generation will not pass away until these things have happened. The word ‘generation’ can literally mean all who are alive at one time, and this is the plain meaning in relation to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which was the decisive event that occurred in AD70 when the Romans crushed a Jewish uprising.

But this ‘generation’ can also mean this ‘race’, perhaps meaning humanity – *homo sapiens* – it is God’s plan for us as humans to bring salvation and healing, to make all things right and new.

But Jesus tells us clearly that “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v32). But whenever it is that Jesus returns, whether it is today, next year, 500 years’ time or later, the Lord’s return will be a real experience for each of us.

Let me explain. When we die, we will then be raised to life again, as someone woken from sleep. I understand it to be that having died, however much time then passes, our next conscious moment is when the Lord comes again and we are raised to life.

Whether still alive or already dead at the time of Christ's return, together we will stand before the Lord, when he comes to judge the living and the dead. The world may – or may not – have to wait long for Christ's return for all wrongs to be righted, environmental destruction to be reversed, and all relationships to be restored – but as individuals we will all meet our Lord at the same time.

How does that make you feel? Are you concerned? Are you excited? I'm sure we have a mixture of feelings about Jesus' return. In thinking about our attitude, Jesus speaks of a man going away and then returning to his house.

It makes me think of parents perhaps going away for a long trip, leaving their teenage children in charge of the house. Perhaps they return a few days earlier than expected. And what will they find? What will be the reaction of the children? Will the children have been responsible and taken care of the house. Might they have missed their parents and met them in the drive with hugs and kisses, the early return being a joyful reunion. Or will they be caught on the hop, the house in disarray or even in serious need of cleaning or even repair, maybe an unauthorised house party in full swing! That would be quite a different experience!

“Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come” (v33).

When Jesus returns, or when our time individually is up, we must not be found 'sleeping', as it were. We are to remain alert. We are called to watchful waiting. Not to wait on the hilltops with our eyes fixed on the horizon awaiting Christ's return, but each of us servants should be doing our assigned tasks, as the story goes, doing the good works that God has prepared for each of us. Whilst we wait for Christ's return, the important thing is not watching the calendar but building our character, pleasing our Lord, and on his return hearing His loving commendation, and receiving His reward (cf Mt 25:14–30).

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Christ's return will be the coming of spring after winter, the brightness of day after a long, dark night.

I'll close with some words written by St Paul to the Thessalonian believers, whom he urges to *watchful waiting* and faithful industry.

1 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

4 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thess 5:1-11).

Let us, brothers and sisters, continue to encourage and build each other up, in this season of watchful waiting. Let us keep our eyes turned towards the coming of Jesus Christ and the joy of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.